

# Western Culture and the “Hypothesis of God”

Paul Tyson

## Introduction:

Does God exist? Does it make sense to believe in a God who is the creator and “Grand Organizing Director” of the physical cosmos?<sup>1</sup> Does cultural relativism and religious pluralism discount the supposed truths that religious believers claim to know? Are the speculations of theoretical physicists about the apparent intelligence underlying the structure of physical reality more likely to be true than the claims of religious believers?

These are the kinds of hypothetical questions that rise naturally from the assumed philosophy of religion underpinning modern Western culture. In our culture, it is natural for us to play with “God” as an abstract hypothetical idea tied back to scientific theories about the origin and order of the physical cosmos.<sup>2</sup> Further, if we do not find this tie back to a physical cosmology rationally or empirically convincing, then naturally enough, we tend to not find it reasonable to believe in God. But, if we did not have the assumed philosophy of religion that we do, the very questions that we typically ask about “God” and the type of approaches we naturally take to answering those questions may well make no sense at all.

Western culture has not always had the assumed philosophy of religion that we now have. According to Paul Tillich, we experienced a seismic culturo-conceptual shift in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the dominant philosophy of religion that emerged in Christendom after that time underpins some of the most basic assumptions and behavioural patterns of the modern Western life form to this day.<sup>3</sup> So now, when our way of life is arguably taking serious buffets on many fronts, the substrata of our assumptions about ultimate meaning may also be exposed and up for serious re-examination. Insightful observers of our times have persuasively argued that: the modern and Western way of thinking is being intellectually corroded by postmodernism;<sup>4</sup> the modern and Western way of living is being physically corroded by the enormous power of our instrumental rationality;<sup>5</sup> the modern and Western way of believing is being spiritually corroded by an implicit ontological nihilism;<sup>6</sup> and traditional Western ways of moral relating are being communally corroded by the growing inequalities and fears inherent in our politically imposed materialistic and agonistic success values.<sup>7</sup> In the light of these problems, those who feel these corrosive effects most keenly are trying to perform some very deep adjustments regarding what the basis of our understanding of meaning in Western culture is and should be.

<sup>1</sup> The “Grand Organizing Directorate” is an internet “fuzzy logic” hypothesis – see <http://www.cs.bris.ac.uk/Research/MachineLearning/IntelligentSystems/ISSMartin.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Davies, P., *The Mind of God*, Penguin, London, 1993

<sup>3</sup> Tillich, P., *A History of Christian Thought*, SCM Press, London, 1968, pp 198 – 201

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard, J-F., *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, 1984

<sup>5</sup> Mason, C., *The 2030 Spike*, Earthscan, UK, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Casey, M.A., *Meaninglessness*, Freedom Publishing House, North Melbourne, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Pusey, M., *The Experience of Middle Australia*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2003

I confess to being discontented with what I read as the nihilistic and agonistic trajectories of contemporary Western culture. Hence, in this essay I attempt to explore what I regard as the most basic conceptual structure about ultimate meaning underpinning any given culture – its assumed philosophy of religion – in order to envision a conceptual reformulation for our culture grounded in beliefs that do not lead to nihilism and agonism.<sup>8</sup> In this attempt I will seek to tie in the theological ontology of Paul Tillich with Polanyian personalist epistemology and with the current post-secular interest in Augustine and Aquinas associated with Radical Orthodoxy.

It is important to note from the outset that the scholarly foundation of this paper is Paul Tillich's understanding of the archetypal belief paradigms in the philosophy of religion that he believes so powerfully shape Western cultural history. The sketches of Augustine and Aquinas that are central to the case I put forward are drawn directly from Paul Tillich's work; they are pictures of how I understand Tillich to see Augustine and Aquinas.<sup>9</sup> Tillich was a great Latin scholar with an intense interest in the theology of the Middle Ages, as he saw it as foundational to the deepest structures of belief that underpin contemporary Western culture. However, whether Tillich was right or not about a fundamental tension between Augustine and Aquinas is a question I do not explore in this paper, although it is a question that I believe warrants very close examination.

It is also important to note that I am reading Tillich's Augustinian philosophy of religion in a personalist manner. Personalism is a philosophical movement that has, I believe, some real epistemological answers to what it is that is conceptually mistaken about post/modern Western culture. Yet in this essay I will contend that personalism that is only clear on questions of knowledge, but that is indecisive on questions of being, is still inadequate. In this essay I will put forward the notion that a fully personalist philosophy is both epistemologically and ontologically personalistic, as in Augustine; I will endeavour to describe some of the intellectual strengths of Augustinian personalism; and I will suggest that Augustinian personalism is a viable contemporary alternative to the prevailing impersonalism in Western culture. I will also query the extent to which Aquinas is useful in challenging the norms of modernist truth and secular reason. This query is my Tillichian attempt to ping a little critical pebble over the bows of what I consider to be the most fascinating theological movement of our times, Radical Orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> My essay is an attempt to re-contextualised and re-tell Paul Tillich's essay "Two Types of Philosophy of Religion" (see footnote 14) in which the idea that philosophy of religion is the bed rock of our conceptualisation of meaning in culture is implicit. More recently John Milbank in his *Theology and Social Theory* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990) also strongly argues a tight genealogical case for the primacy of theology (alas, mostly bad theology) in the pivotal political, intellectual, artistic and scientific developments of Western culture.

<sup>9</sup> Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964; *A History of Christian Thought*, SCM Press, London, 1968; *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1., James Nisbet & Co., London, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> I agree entirely with the basic premise of Radical Orthodoxy which is that Western culture is in a state of malaise as a result of underlying weaknesses in its unconscious theological beliefs. Digging down into the primary theological minds that have constructively inspired Western culture (Augustine and Aquinas) in the context of the contemporary postmodern rejection of modernist truth and Enlightenment secularism, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to forge a theologically viable way forward for Western culture. Hence, Tracey Rowland, for example, puts forward the notion of "postmodern Augustinian Thomism" (Rowland, T., *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*, Routledge, London, 2003) as providing us with a theological metanarrative capable of revitalising Western culture at its spiritual heart. In line with Tillich's argument, I am not yet convinced that Aquinas and indeed Aristotle are not

We commence by examining the difference between personalism in epistemology and personalism in ontology.

## I. Two Types of Personalism

Personalist epistemology sees the human knower as an interested being whose mode of existence and whose every belief is essentially interpersonally situated. As no knowledge exists except as had by a personal knower, no knowledge is impersonal and no knowledge is finally independent of the matrix of relationships and beliefs in which our personhood, language and cultural heritage is essentially embedded.<sup>11</sup>

Personalist ontology, however, is not necessarily adhered to by personalist epistemologists. In personalist ontology – as in Augustine – reality itself, not just the human knower, is seen as personally embedded. This is an intrinsically theistic ontology, which is why there is no meaningful distinction between theology and philosophy in Augustine.<sup>12</sup> Though Augustine may seem to be buried a long way down in the history of Western culture, one can still find impressive recent advocates of his personalist ontology. Václav Havel captures this type of outlook well in his famous essay “Politics and Conscience.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet ontological personalism, though it has its contemporary advocates, is a cultural anomaly. An impersonalist and unconsciously atheistic ontology is now deeply embedded in the *Weltanschauung* typically accepted in contemporary Western culture. This being the case, what is taken as obvious by Augustine – particularly our personal and immediate participation in God – seems axiomatically absurd to the normal operational assumptions of our cultural life form. We are accustomed to seeing God as discrete from our being and as a cosmological hypothesis that is both functionally and theoretically extraneous to our daily lives. But in Augustine, God is the immediate and ever present ground of our very being as persons in the world, and the grounds of all reality. God, in Augustinian ontological personalism, cannot be a cosmological hypothesis.

Impersonalist epistemology ignores the personal realities in which knowledge is embedded, as if we have an autonomous faculty of reason, and as if our sensory faculties autonomously present basically reliable objective data to our autonomous thinking “I”. Impersonalist ontology assumes that reality is not grounded intimately in the very being of God, but that reality is “objective”, essentially impersonal, and “out

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in the end deeply formative of the thought structures that became modernist truth and Enlightenment secularism. Hence, as deep and profound a theological thinker as Aquinas is, I think Radical Orthodoxy would more powerfully critique modernist truth and Enlightenment secularism if the differences rather than the similarities in Augustine and Aquinas were more deeply explored, and if Augustine was given primacy over Aquinas in those differences.

<sup>11</sup> Polanyi, M., *Personal Knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, 1962

<sup>12</sup> See also the great Thomistic Jesuit, Copleston, F., *Medieval Philosophy*, A History of Philosophy, Vol II, Continuum, London, 2003, pp 47 – 48: “[Augustine’s] mingling of theological and philosophical themes may appear odd and unmethodical to us today, used as we are to clear distinctions between the provinces of dogmatic theology and philosophy; but one must remember that Augustine, in common with other Fathers and early Christian writers, made no such clear distinction.”

<sup>13</sup> Havel, V., (ed. Wilson, P.), “Politics and Conscience” (1984), *Open Letters*, Vintage Books, USA, 1992, pp 249 - 271

there" discrete from our consciousness of it. What Tillich sees as the assumed "cosmological philosophy of religion" indigenous to nominalist grounded Western culture, implies impersonalism in both epistemology and ontology. Conversely what Tillich calls the Augustinian "ontological philosophy of religion" implies personalism in both epistemology and ontology.

A personalist reading of Tillich opens up the idea that it is our "cosmological philosophy of religion" that underpins the deep seated and simply assumed impersonalist norms of Western culture. This "cosmological philosophy of religion" must be exposed as wanting if the very categories of Augustinian personalism are to be even comprehensible to us. Tillich, as an Augustinian Lutheran, has sought to critically expose the "cosmological philosophy of religion" assumed in modern Western culture, and if one finds his argument convincing, Tillich's work in this area is of great cultural importance.

## **II. Two Types of Philosophy of Religion, and Western culture**

In 1946 Paul Tillich wrote an essay titled "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion" wherein he distinguishes between ontological and cosmological philosophies of religion.<sup>14</sup>

According to Tillich, an ontological philosophy of religion understands God as someone from whom one is estranged, but from whom one "never has been and never can be separated."<sup>15</sup> Tillich locates Augustine as the great exponent of this ontological philosophy of religion in Western culture. Here, our very existence as human persons is at all times totally dependent on God, in whose Personhood and Being we participate. Hence we are known by God, and can know God, with greater immediacy than we know any sensory perception or rational truth, and God's reality is more basic to our own being than even our self and relational awareness. To Augustine, this is true whether we like it or recognise or not. The realism of the Middle Ages – where God is understood as the grounds of all reality, and where all that is not good, beautiful and true is perversely estranged from God – is steeped in this philosophy of religion.

Metaphysics grounded in an ontological philosophy of religion is not about seeing through the mirage of appearance and superstition with abstract reason or scientific thoroughness, in order to find the cold, hard truth about objective reality. Rather, metaphysics is the insight of true wisdom known only by participation in divine truth; metaphysics is true theology. True theological knowledge is attained by the personal reception of the grace of God (who is the ground of reality) revealing His essentially personal and intrinsically meaningful self directly to us via our unavoidable participation in reality as persons. This revelation enables us to understand the true meaning of all reality. There is no nature and supernature as such in Augustinian metaphysics, for all nature is essentially transcendently grounded.

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<sup>14</sup> Tillich, P., *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, I, 4, May, 1946. This essay is reproduced in a collection of Tillich essays titled *Theology of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1964, pp 10 – 29) from which I quote.

<sup>15</sup> Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p 10

In contrast, Tillich maintains that the cosmological philosophy of religion views, in a nominalist manner, both human and divine persons as autonomous individual entities. To this outlook all persons, including God, exist as essentially self contained beings who can only know each other indirectly through reason and the senses (apart from the participatory internal relations of the Trinity). The nominalists rejected the immediate participatory dependence of human being on the divine Being of God and set about mapping the cosmos in terms of what could be known by autonomous human reason and perception, as complimented by a separate category of divinely revealed truths that must be blindly and unquestioningly believed. Thus deference to the authority of the church to tell us truths about God we could know no other way becomes the knowledge of faith, and thus the knowledge of faith and the knowledge of reason are methodologically and ontologically delineated. This is the beginning of secular reason. Yet, at this birth of secular reason the nominalists expected that there would be a neat coalescence between the super-rational authority of the church and the rational and empirical authority of our 'natural' epistemological powers.

As significant as nominalists like William of Ockham and Duns Scotus were in dislodging Augustinian personalist ontology from its place of eminence in Western culture, Tillich notes how important Aquinas' Aristotelian epistemology is in furthering the cosmological philosophy of religion. Whilst Aquinas did not reject Augustinian ontology in doctrine (see *Summa Theologica* I,8,1), Tillich maintains that Aquinas did reject any significant and any ordinary role for Augustinian personalist epistemology in the realm of *sapientia*.<sup>16</sup> To Augustine, true knowledge of reality can be known, and can only be known, via personally immediate divine illumination, as received by those who in faith and humility are open to God.<sup>17</sup> And this relational faith and this humble participation in the mind of God is the essence of the knowledge of truth and the very mode of our participation in reason; faith is here in no way separate from or partnered to 'natural' reason, and reason here is not seen as some power or faculty of the autonomous human mind. Aquinas, in contrast, allows our natural sensory faculties to point towards (but never attains) the knowledge of God via the mediacy of human perception and logic, as we seek to probe God's effects, though we do not directly know His Person by natural revelation. Aquinas is not limited to the knowledge of natural revelation however, and he applies his powerful mind to the tools of Aristotelian logic in order to reasonably understand the "special" revealed truths handed to him by the super-natural and unquestionable authority of the church. Aquinas holds that the content of special revelation is beyond, but never contradicted by, the feeble scope of what our logic and the senses can know.

Tillich maintains that Aquinas' application of Aristotelian epistemology to natural revelation and his application of Aristotelian logic to special revelation covers all categories of knowledge and reason in a way that excludes the direct personal knowledge of the Divine Grounds of our being, which is the only true ground of all knowledge, belief and reason in Augustine. Hence it is Aquinas who "cuts the nerve of the ontological approach."<sup>18</sup> After the 13<sup>th</sup> century nominalist impersonalism and Aquinian epistemological and logical categories worked together to almost completely

<sup>16</sup> In Augustine, *sapientia* is wisdom, knowledge of true ends, and is known via divine illumination as one encounters God, unmediated, in the grounds of one's own being.

<sup>17</sup> Nash, R.H., *The Light of the Mind: St Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1969

<sup>18</sup> Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p 17



replace the Augustinian ontological philosophy of religion with the cosmological philosophy of religion characteristically implicit in modern Western culture to this day.

Metaphysics grounded in this cosmological philosophy of religion that emerged after Aquinas is all about the creation of a logically necessary conceptual map – a cosmology – of what can be known to the thinking substance of the individual human mind about universal verities within the natural world, and via the authority of special revelation, of logically necessary features of supernatural reality beyond the apparent world. Moving forward from the thirteenth century, this cosmological philosophy of religion and its ideas of metaphysics, the nature of the individual and the impossibility of direct participatory knowledge of God,<sup>19</sup> settled down deep into the conceptual assumptions of Western culture. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, for example, Descartes took the autonomy of human consciousness as given and the methods of valid natural knowledge as only indirect (reason and senses) in a manner foundationally shaped by this cosmological philosophy of religion. Hence modern Western culture, with its science, its concept of society, freedom, knowledge and power, and its concept of self and God, arises from the Western cosmological tradition of the philosophy of religion. It seems that theology deeply shapes culture.<sup>20</sup>

The question of the existence of God cannot seriously arise within an ontological philosophy of religion – for it is simply a meaningless question. To ask whether God exists or not is to assume that meaninglessness is an ontological possibility, which is contradicted by our asking an ontological question at all and by the reality which grounds our very existence as persons and makes it possible for us to participate in meaning and reason. Further, within an ontological philosophy of religion the means of knowing God is not mediated by reason or the senses but is immediately apprehended by the personal essence of my being. In sharp contrast, for the cosmological approach what is knowable about God becomes an object of my reasoning (a construct of my mind) and this idea can be tested against my merely probable sensory apprehension of the cosmos. Where I believe that my autonomous mind is the final authority for the credibility of all knowledge (for I have no direct contact with anything else), and its categories of judging the truth or falsity of any idea presented to it are purely rational and empirical, then any reason I have for believing in the existence of any ratio-empirically intangible entity, such as God – but also personhood, the human spirit, love, beauty, goodness and meaning itself – becomes inherently flimsy. Hence, it is Tillich's contention that since the thirteenth century the cosmological philosophy of religion has made "atheism not only possible, but almost unavoidable"<sup>21</sup> in Western culture.

One of the most vivid utterances expressing the atheistic end point of the Western cosmological philosophy of religion is attributed to the great French mathematician

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<sup>19</sup> Nominalist thought allowed for participatory knowledge of God, but only as discretely found in the religious domain, and as mediated to the believer by those endowed with the authority of the church, in the Eucharist. Ordinary and holistic participatory love/knowledge of God in daily life – something the early fathers like Origen, and also Augustine, knew as the grounds of all other love/knowledge in all spheres of life – is just not consciously there anymore in the thought structures of Western culture by the time of Descartes.

<sup>20</sup> Again, see Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, for a strong genealogical argument supporting this idea.

<sup>21</sup> Tillich, P., *Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p 18

Laplace. Napoleon in quizzing Laplace about his understanding of the origins and stabilising forces of the physical cosmos, asked him whether his cosmology should have a place for God. Laplace replied simply that he had “no need of that hypothesis.”<sup>22</sup> Enlightenment physical cosmology, the logical end point of the Western cosmological philosophy of religion, pursues knowledge and understanding from a set of criteria that cannot directly know God. Further, understanding the cosmos only in terms of what Enlightenment physical cosmology supposedly can rationally and empirically know, such an outlook does not need any super cosmological entity to start reality, to give reality its rationality, to give us meaning, or to grasp or even point to anything beyond or beneath our knowledge of the empirical and the rational.

Philosophy of religion is the most primary building material of any cultural edifice, for it is the foundation upon which all our beliefs about meaning and ultimate concern are built.<sup>23</sup> Given the assumed cosmological philosophy of religion underlying both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, an assumed impersonalist nominalist concept of the self, and an assumed impersonalist Aristotelian concept of valid thought and knowledge is implied. Hence, God’s place in our belief system becomes a cosmological hypothesis, and, in that place, He also becomes a logically and empirically extraneous cosmological hypothesis. This outlook makes atheism, secular reason and public indeterminacy about ultimate concern seem eminently reasonable to us. Theism premised on this cosmology becomes an act of voluntarist free belief, and the extraneousness of this hypothetical cosmological God is assumed by such theism. However, apologetics premised on a theistic cosmological philosophy of religion often seeks to persuade people that the cosmological hypothesis of God, though not provable by the categories of reason or empirical knowledge alone, is even so *not* extraneous, for both subjective psychological reasons and for objective cosmological reasons. Somehow, just believing in the existence of God (and of the Christian God specifically) in the face of His extraneousness, as if mental assent to the theistic cosmological model is the crux of faith, is an underlying concern in modern religious apologetic appeals to Secular Man. So deeply embedded is the cosmological philosophy of religion in contemporary Western culture that epistemological and ontological impersonalism are often as firmly assumed in modern Western Christianity as they are in modern Western agnosticism and atheism.

But the picture is more complex than this. Whilst impersonalist epistemology and impersonalist ontology combine to form the dominant mode of modern Western cosmological thinking, three other combinations in personalism and impersonalism in ontology and epistemology are open to us. It seems to me that as we have tried to work our way out of the failures of modernism, we have not yet come to embrace the only finally credible alternative to the double impersonalism in both epistemology and ontology that underpins our culture; we have not yet embraced personalism in both epistemology and ontology.

<sup>22</sup> See webpage by Cabillon, J.G., “Laplace, Napoleon, God”, <http://mathforum.org/epigone/math-history-list/terdquergan>

<sup>23</sup> I maintain that religion itself is more primary than our thoughts about religion to meaning in culture, and that God is more primary than our religion. But in terms of how we construct culture in giving conceptual content to our most basic beliefs, the way we think about religion, and the way we believe in or disbelieve in God, is basic to all other meanings about ultimate concern and the meaningful ends of our culturally specific way of life.

### III. Four onto-epistemological outlooks

#### Impersonalism in both epistemology and ontology

Descartes, the father of the modern scientific method, was an impersonalist in both epistemology and ontology.<sup>24</sup> Whilst he needed God as a metaphysical insurance policy for the connection of his solipsistic rationalism with objective physical reality, the atheism of Laplace traces its roots directly from the notion of truth implicit in the cultural history of mathematics and empirical investigation that Descartes initiates. With Tillich, I believe impersonalism in both epistemology and ontology implies at least agnosticism, and makes atheism a rational faith very much at home in our intellectual culture. Yet with Polanyi, I maintain that impersonalist epistemology is intellectually untenable. Further, I maintain that impersonalist ontology without a grounding in the notion of truth upheld by impersonalist epistemology is an entirely arbitrary belief position with no innate or objective justification. So to the other three options.

#### Personalism in epistemology with no explicit personalist ontology

Michael Polanyi makes up all the ground Descartes leaves out in terms of how we know anything, and scientific things in particular. Yet his political liberalism and the vibrant truth seeking side of Polanyi's philosophy of science also carries him down the road of Enlightenment secularism, which in practise tends to bracket off questions of ultimate meaning from public knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Further, so ontologically inadequate is most modern Western religious doctrine - as it needs to be in order to fit comfortably with the frame of Enlightenment secularism - that Polanyi may have had little exposure to a vibrant Christian ontological personalism.<sup>26</sup> For whatever reason, Polanyi cannot bring himself to be decisive about ontology.<sup>27</sup> This causes his thought some serious difficulties. Polanyi is committed to the process of knowledge being culturally encapsulated, and so Jacobs can demonstrate very effectively that Polanyi is a tacit cognitive relativist; yet Polanyi maintains that he is committed to absolute and unitary truth.<sup>28</sup> In Augustinian terms, it seems reasonable to believe that culturally encapsulated personalistic knowledge can be true in a manner that transcends culture, provided culture and nature are both ontologically grounded in a personal and knowable Ground Of Reality. But Polanyi cannot link the relativist implications of his epistemological work to any specific ontological anchor in which all culture is

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<sup>24</sup> Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, (trans), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, 1985

<sup>25</sup> Freedom and truth are rightly valued by Enlightenment secularists. However, freedom and truth can be politically and ecclesiologically configured in such a way as to enable greater integration of the private and the public and the sacred than the nominalistic concept of the independent spheres permits. Enlightenment secularism rests upon this nominalistic separation of spheres. Yet, to find problems with Enlightenment secularism does not preclude one from upholding freedom and truth, even though the assumptions of Western secular liberalism now have a very hard time conceiving of such a stance.

<sup>26</sup> Though I understand that Polanyi and Tillich did meet in 1963, and had a great respect for each other's work.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, R., *Transcendence and Immanence in the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and Christian Theism*, Rutherford House, Edinburgh, 1992; Jha, S.R., *Reconsidering Michael Polanyi's Philosophy*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002; Mullins, P., "M. Polanyi 1891 - 1976", <http://www.deepinsight.org/articles/polanyi.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Jacobs, S., "Michael Polanyi, Tacit Cognitive Relativist", *The Heythrop Journal*, October 2001, vol. 42, no. 4, pp 463-479



embedded that would enable all ‘language games’ to be interconnected and universally undergirded by the ontology of meaning itself (ie *Logos*).<sup>29</sup> Polanyi wants truth to remain culturally encapsulated and yet be released from fundamental cultural relativism, but, out of theological shyness, he cannot bring himself to be committed to any specific theological ontology capable of doing this. In this area, Polanyi’s work is subject to serious incoherence. And if Tillich’s wonderful insight that “every epistemology contains and implicit ontology” is accepted,<sup>30</sup> then Polanyi’s failure to uphold a decisive personalist ontology leaves serious holes in his otherwise profound and wide ranging work.

### Personalism in ontology and impersonalism in epistemology<sup>31</sup>

Aquinas in seeking to synthesise Platonic Augustinianism with his own Christian Aristotelianism endeavours to keep the theological ontology of Augustine whilst marrying it to a more natural-revelation-friendly Aristotelian epistemology. It is Tillich’s contention that the marriage does not work and critical ordinary features of Augustinian unmediated ontological knowledge are lost by Aquinas in this process. Aquinas tries to overcome the Platonic “dualism” of Augustine where personal spiritual knowledge, *sapientia*, and impersonal natural knowledge, *scientia*, are in important regards discontinuous.<sup>32</sup> The effect as Tillich sees it is that all knowledge in Aquinas is characterised in Aristotelian terms and is divided into natural revelation, the rational theology of special revelation, or as super-rational mystical experience. *Sapientia* as Augustine understands it is now mediated to the believer (rather than immediately personally known) through the church in the theological categories of *scientia*. In Augustine’s “mystical realism”<sup>33</sup> there is a direct though exclusively grace enabled “theonomous character to the immediate world”.<sup>34</sup> To Augustine all that is real, as seen by the eyes of faith, is an intelligently mystical revelation of the very person of God. This immediacy, height and saturation of revelation for the believer is absent from Aquinas, and so the unmediated knowledge of God through all things in the ontological philosophy of religion is dogmatically retained but existentially lost.

Tillich maintains that Aquinas’ ontology is undermined by his Aristotelian epistemology as his synthesis of Plato and Aristotle fails to join Platonic revelation with Aristotelian science, to the detriment of the immediate, personal, ordinary and intelligent existential knowledge of the divine Person speaking to us and holding us through all things. This puts Aquinas in a strangely similar but inverted position to

<sup>29</sup> See the doctrine of *Logos* perused by Heraclitus, Philo of Alexandria, and particularly, in relation to Augustine, Saint John in John 1:1-18

<sup>30</sup> Tillich, P., *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1., James Nisbet & Co., London, 1968, p 23

<sup>31</sup> To use Aquinas influenced *scientia* as an illustration of “impersonalist” epistemology requires a bit of careful explanation. As Tillich’s understanding of the epistemological implications of Aquinas’ thought is critical to his genealogical case about the rise of the cosmological philosophy of religion in Western culture, an attempt at such explanation cannot be avoided. See appendix one.

<sup>32</sup> In Augustine, *scientia* is knowledge derived both from the senses and from intellectual intuition of universals. *Scientia* is practical and instrumental knowledge which also has a theoretical component. *Sapientia*, to re-iterate, in contrast to *scientia*, is wisdom, knowledge of true ends, and is known via divine illumination as one encounters God, unmediated, in the grounds of one’s own being.

To Augustine *scientia* informed by *sapientia* is science that is directed by a good end. However, *scientia* cannot inform *sapientia* in that good science cannot tell one the propositions of wisdom.

<sup>33</sup> Tillich, P., *A History of Christian Thought*, SCM Press, London, 1968, p 198

<sup>34</sup> Tillich, P., *ibid*, p 117; see also pp112-117, pp198-201

Polanyi, where Aquinas is committed to ontological personalism, but his epistemology and his understanding of ecclesial authority cannot coherently allow it.

### Personalism in both epistemology and ontology

Augustine unifies epistemology with ontology by assuming an isomorphic relationship between the ontology of reality in which our being participates, and our epistemological powers, that participate in the knowledge of reality in a manner derived from our being in reality. Being is prior to knowing in this outlook. If we take our personal being as primary to knowledge, as seems reasonable enough from an epistemological personalists stance, we have no grounds to doubt the priority of ontology over epistemology that Augustine holds to. It is just that Augustine has more theological courage than us moderns in finding God to be the Personal centre of all human being, knowing, saying and relating. Augustine can be situated within the same epistemological trajectory as Polanyi, yet culture is never simply the product of historically situated human personal beliefs to Augustine, but all culture is grounded in the power of being in which human persons exist, the uncreated power that transcends humanity and nature. Hence, the belief, culture, history and relationship context of all personal knowing (and there is no impersonal knowing) is fully embraced by Augustine, yet ultimately real truth is not bounded by the limitations and relativities of human culture as Polanyi's lack of explicit transcendent ontological grounding to human knowledge implies.<sup>35</sup>

## **IV. Augustinian Personalism and contemporary Western culture**

Contemporary Western culture seems to be in something of a crisis of meaning. There is no communal coherence underlying the plethora of individual belief assumptions about the nature of who we are and what is reasonable to believe regarding truth, beauty and the good. Hence, we cannot see how the very notion of ultimate meaning can play any culturally unifying role in, for example, civic morality. We are a people without a shared vision of wisdom as we have no public language in which we can reasonably debate what ends are intrinsically important in life. We only have the appearance of cultural unity in the pragmatic technologies of means – only instrumental rationality constitutes public and shared knowledge.

Our deeply culturally embedded assumed philosophy of religion – a philosophy that is inherently cosmological, nominalist and secular – leads us to this crisis of meaning which is the absence of the very language and political structures of communal wisdom. And it is the “God” of our cultural philosophy of religion, whether believed in or not believed in, that sustains the very soul of the life form of late secular Western culture.<sup>36</sup> The intellectual paradigm of this culture assumes what Milbank

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<sup>35</sup> Mendelson, M., Stanford Online Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine>

<sup>36</sup> Late secularism belongs more to what Middleton and Walsh (*Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, IVP, USA, 1995, pp 54-55 ) call "hypermodernism" or an intellectual postmodernism shaped by the inherent materialism and scepticism of late modernism than to a culturally post modern outlook. David Tacey (*Re-Enchantment*, HarperCollins, Australia, 2000) points out that with a great cultural resurgence of interest in "the spiritual", the postmodern outside of academia is often also post-secular.

insightfully describes as “methodological atheism”,<sup>37</sup> and such a paradigm allows God to be a hypothesis for those irrationalists who wish to privately “believe in (the existence of) God” as a sheer voluntarist act, but under the law of secular reason, all real scholarship for the public domain is methodologically atheistic no matter what a scholar’s personal beliefs might be.

But there is hope. What if this hypothetical God does not exist? More to the point, what if the hypothetical God of any cosmological philosophy of religion is unavoidably a perverse and hubristic idol of the intellect? The clear cultural trend to reject both belief and disbelief in the idea of God implied by the assumptions of modern Western culture could easily turn into a radical post-secular shift away from the philosophy of religion that grounds our cultural atheism. It is worth noting *what* idea of God we no longer believe in.

Personalist epistemology is a critical component in answering the profoundly significant epistemological failures of modernism. However, without a personalist ontology, personalist epistemology cannot escape cultural relativism which provides it with no clear intellectual advantage over impersonalism, which is equally a cultural construct. Hence, it seems apparent that Augustinian personalism, which is both epistemologically and ontologically personalistic, can provide the grounding for a constructive ethical and metaphysical alternative to modernism. In our meaning starved and socially atomised cultural environment, the living vision of who God is and how we are related to Him and one another in Augustinian personalism may well have a cultural appeal and believability that the nearly dead cosmological God cannot compete with.

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<sup>37</sup> Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p 249

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## Appendix One:

Plato and Aristotle are the philosophical giants of Classical Western culture, and their most profound Christian transformers, Augustine and Aquinas, are the theological giants of Western Christendom. Together, these four are peerless in their philosophical/theological influence on Western culture. Respecting this reality, I have no desire to deride that great doctor of the Catholic church, Saint Thomas. Tillich also had a profound respect for Aquinas. However, Tillich does see Aquinas' attempt to synthesise the idealistic and practical streams of Western thought as a glorious failure of the highest intellectual calibre which unfortunately had some devastating consequences down the track for Western culture.

Below is my understanding of Tillich's stance.

Aquinas in seeking to synthesise Platonic Augustinianism with his own Christian Aristotelianism runs into a difficult problem. Augustine, in the manner of Plato, leans in a dualistic direction wherein the transitory and the contingent gain what meaning and reality they have from their participation in the eternal and the unconditioned. This is not a dualism of the natural and the supernatural, considered as autonomous spheres, and it is not a "Greek" dualism where mind is good and body is evil; rather it is a "dualism" where the tangible (eg matter) is derived from and totally dependent on the intangible (eg Divine Word), and so truth about the tangible can only be had by reference to that intangible reality on which the tangible depends, and not the other way around, and certainly not by reference only to the criteria of tangible knowledge. In Augustine, in the manner of Plato, revelation directly apprehended by the personal and imperishable spirit of a human being, is basic to any genuinely true knowledge. Contemplating the transcendentia is hence basic to anyone's spiritual, moral and intellectual health, and *scientia* unformed by *sapientia* is knowledge only of meaningless means without any divinely illuminated knowledge of meaningful ends.

Aristotle and Aquinas are not as sceptical as Plato and Augustine about what can be truly learned in the realm of contingent, conditioned tangible perception and abstract logic. Aquinas seeks to overcome Augustine's "dualism", elevating nature, as perceived by both those with faith and those with no faith, to the realm of revelation so that the knowledge of *scientia* is continuous with the knowledge of *sapientia* making knowledge a seamless unity of spirit and body.

Whilst a theologically framed overcoming of Augustinian "dualism" is Aquinas' intention, his thought opened up two avenues of thinking about knowledge that were not open under a more Augustinian and Platonic "dualism". Firstly, *scientia* is given a sort of autonomous legitimacy regarding practical truths, independent of *sapientia*. That is, natural truths, in their own knowledge terms, are now thought to disclose wisdom in a way not compatible with Plato and Augustine's basic scepticism of the *sapientia* blindness of our merely ratio-epistemological powers. Secondly, given the legitimacy of *scientia* autonomously conceived, the criteria of *scientia* can be applied to the categories of *sapientia*, and theology can become systematised in the categories of science where its objects of observation and logical analysis are not rocks and trees but the texts of divine revelation; theology is now the science of God. So Aquinas' thought undermines Augustine's high and unmediated understanding of the way we receive the knowledge of eternal truth, and it can reduce the Augustinian non-

contingent and essentially revealed knowledge of *sapientia* to merely ratio-empirical terms of *scientia* as applied to the special revelations held by the church.

Aquinas seeks to keep the theological ontology of Augustine whilst rejecting the primacy Augustine gives to the unmediated personalistic epistemology of *sapientia*. But this does not really work as Aquinas ends up holding personalistic ontological beliefs that can be savagely critiqued by his epistemological method. Such critique was not performed in Aquinas' day because ecclesial authority in the form of "special revelation" was culturally beyond doubt. But when doubt came back to the West with the Renaissance, the super-rational category of special revelation could no longer be distinguished from merely irrational authority, and the political expression of the Church's beliefs could not be distinguished from the merely tyrannical exercise of power. Couple this with the emphasis of individualism and sovereignty in the late Middle Ages arising from the nominalists, and special revelation and sheer ecclesial power move to shut down newly liberated individual unbelief, and the Augustinian understanding of the souls immediate access to divine revelation as carried by the Lutherans, clashes catastrophically with the framework of knowledge and authority set up in Catholicism after Aquinas.

In attempting to overcoming Augustinian "dualism" where the knowledge of *scientia* is subservient to the knowledge of *sapientia*, Aquinas creates a new epistemological "dualism" where natural revelation is subservient to special revelation. We now have the knowledge of Aristotelian *scientia* with its natural philosophy and theology – using the categories of logic and perception – and special knowledge of God mediated to the believer by the church. Aquinas hence justifies an unquestionable authority for the centralised administration of the Western church, and promotes an Aristotelian epistemology of *scientia* regarding truth and meaning mediated to us through nature.

The culturally Roman concept of centralised ecclesial authority in which Aquinas sits, though it had its roots from before the time of Augustine, has proved a great obstacle in dealings between Eastern and Western Christianity, was one of the key drivers of the Reformation, and was one of the key notions reacted against in the concepts of political and religious freedom to emerge out of the Enlightenment. In Aquinian ecclesial authority faith and reason are demarcated and yet interlocked in a manner that is quite foreign to the way Augustine understood them.

The Aquinian concept of natural knowledge is impersonalist in that knowledge presented to the senses and subjected to the criteria of logic is held to give revelation about God in a manner that is valid in the terms of impersonally understood (objective) categories of the natural powers of the thinking subject. That is, through natural revelation I know *about* God's necessary existence, and I can know *what* natural moral, logical and scientific truths are, but I know this *within* my own intellect, and I know it in a coldly propositional (objective) manner without relationally and immediately knowing God. In contrast Augustine's knowledge of revelation is inherently personal and participatory, and Augustine's understanding of all so called "knowledge" that is not divinely relationally embedded, is that it is inherently uncertain.

So Aquinas was never a nominalist, and was always a great admirer and deeply intelligent reader of Augustine, and yet his Aristotelian epistemology and his model

of ecclesial authority is taken up by nominalists and secularists in a way that decisively ends the Augustinian ontological philosophy of religion that had underpinned Western culture since the early Middle Ages.